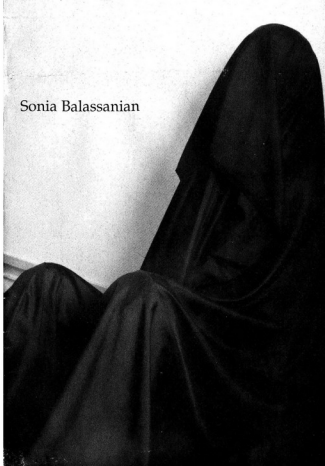


Sonia Balassanian

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art  
750 Marguerite Drive  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27106  
(919)725-1904



Sonia Balassanian

*Shadow of My Sisters*

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

September 24 through December 12, 1993

From her decorative paintings of the 1970s to her haunting installations of the past decade, Sonia Balassanian's work has always reflected her roots as an Iranian woman of Armenian descent. Deeply influenced by the aesthetics and politics of the Middle East, Balassanian uses the ancient symbols of Muslim life to jolt her viewers into reflections on the modern condition.

In 1965 Balassanian came to the United States to enter a B.F.A. program sponsored by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania. After she finished her degree and returned to Iran in 1972, she established herself as a promising young painter, recognized in the collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts.

Until Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in 1979, Balassanian lived in both Tehran and New York, studying at Pratt Institute and then in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. Her paintings of this period spoke to the beauty of Persian miniatures and the calligraphy that adorns them. But when repressive change swept Iran during the 1980s, Balassanian's life and art were deeply altered. She moved permanently to New York, and with her physical move came a shift in her artistic sensibilities. Moving away from the softly colored surfaces of her paintings, she began to experiment with tougher imagery in a broad range of media.

For her 1980 exhibition at Elise Meyer Gallery in New York, Balassanian photocopied repeated images of herself in a *chador*—the traditional robe worn by Muslim women, which became the only female garment permitted under Khomeini's regime. Multiple pairs of her almond eyes stared out at the viewer, a device she has continued to use, most recently in *The Other Side*, her show at the Sculpture Center (New York, 1992). In 1982 Balassanian expanded her criticism of the political situation in Iran and further extended her use of disquieting imagery. Her large 1982 installation, *Black, Black Days*, created for Franklin Furnace (New York), featured a Persian fountain, burnt books, and a charred baby carriage.

In the last decade, the focus of Balassanian's work has shifted to

installation. She has mounted several environmental sets for experimental dance and theatrical performances. The most ambitious of these projects, *Law of Remains* (1992), by Reza Abdo, continues the tradition of audience confrontation established during the 1970s by such groups as the Living Theatre and Squat Theatre. For this highly charged atmosphere, Balassanian created dramatic mise-en-scènes inspired by the shocking visions of the director.

*Law of Remains* was staged in a transient hotel in midtown Manhattan. Balassanian created three enormous sets on two floors of the building. Heaven was represented by a cavernous room filled with dirty bathtubs, thirteen metal beds borrowed from a prison, and two mummies hanging from the ceiling in the glare of bare light bulbs. A "Burn House" scene was staged in a room of burnt furniture and a 30-foot-long table covered with a burnt lace cloth and burned books. The room smoldered as the actors performed.

*Law of Remains* signaled an aesthetic leap that can also be seen in Balassanian's gallery installations. At the time that *Law of Remains* was being staged, she also mounted *The Other Side*, an installation at the Sculpture Center (1992), and followed it with a slightly different version at The Museum of Modern Art (1993). Both installations echoed the jarring power of *Law of Remains*. Chador-draped women re-emerge as symbolic icons, slightly larger and more imposing than life. They confront the viewer in silence—a silence that penetrates as sharply as the cacophony of *Law of Remains*. Unlike the performance, which flagrantly disregarded conventional taboos, the gallery installations evoke the tradition-bound rituals of a repressive society.

For the exhibition at SECCA, Balassanian continues to conjure images of the Muslim world. The concealed woman speaks with a quiet voice from deep within her fettered self. Although her message is never specified, its strength is overwhelming.

Susan Lubowsky  
Director



Sonia Balassanian's *Shadow of My Sisters* uses images of repressed Muslim women to make a larger statement about victims of persecution and intolerance worldwide. *Shadow of My Sisters* thus represents both Balassanian's coming to terms with her own past as a native Iranian woman self-exiled in the United States since 1979, and an attempt to use art as a catalyst for altering universal attitudes and behavior.

When I first saw *Shadow of My Sisters*, the work was set up in Balassanian's New York studio. As I visited, the constant ring of the telephone forced Balassanian to abandon me for short periods of time. Surrounded by shrouded figures of *Shadow of My Sisters*, I contemplated her stories. She told me of a once-wooded town in Armenia that is now denuded of trees—the inhabitants cut them down to burn the wood for warmth. Numerous young people there have prosthetic legs and arms, their bodies shattered by the civil war between Christians and Muslims. She spoke of a time prior to the Iranian revolution in 1979 when women were able to walk the streets of Tehran in Western dress; today, mandatory dress for women is the *chador*, a black veil that covers the female body. This account speaks to fundamental changes in Iranian society and the lack of choice now available to its citizens. Balassanian, a recognized poet, painter, and teacher, could not live in such a society and chose exile instead.

Balassanian's experiences empower *Shadow of My Sisters*. Eleven female figures draped in black fabric lie, stand, or kneel in states of reflection, distress, and submission. Though mute and devoid of personal identity, the forms are defiant. They seem to possess an insolence obtained through years of suppression. The light of strings of light bulbs that intertwine the figures momentarily blinds the viewer and sets the stage for an interrogation. This mood is reinforced by the parallel between the black fabric that shrouds the figures and the black robes worn by judges. Thus, the installation becomes a theater of interrogation and a catalyst for the contemplation of man's propensity for oppressive

behavior—toward Muslim women, toward women generally, and toward the oppressed worldwide.

By providing participants with an avenue to experience feelings of despair and alienation, *Shadow of My Sisters* draws on the viewer's ability to feel compassion. The lights and silent figures disorient participants and coerce them into joining the arena. This effectively redefines viewers as victims, which, Balassanian believes, develops an understanding of and a tolerance for multiple points of view and personal identity.

*Shadow of My Sisters* addresses broad issues of intolerance and oppression—Muslim, feminist, and universal. Through the work, Balassanian refers to her past, but more importantly, she speaks with a compelling empathy for all humankind.

Jeff Fleming  
Curator

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Cover and preceding pages: *Shadow of My Sisters*, 1993  
Fabric, lights, paper, plaster, wire,  
and wood  
11 figures approximately  
6 x 3 x 2 feet  
Photo credit: Jackson Smith

Sonia Balassanian

Born 1942, Iran  
Lives in New York City

Education

Joint Program of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and  
the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania, B.F.A., 1970  
Independent Study Program, Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York, New York, 1971-72  
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, M.F.A., 1978

Select Solo Exhibitions

1992 Sculpture Center, New York, New York  
1989 Exit Art, New York, New York  
1982 Franklin Furnace, New York, New York

Select Group Exhibitions

1993 "Readymade Identities," The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York, New York  
1991 "Burning Hell," Franklin Furnace, New York, New York  
1990 "Memory/Reality," Ceres Gallery, New York, New York  
1989 "On the Cutting Edge: 10 Curators Choose 30 Artists,"  
Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Hempstead, New York  
1988 "Committed to Print," The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York, New York  
1986 "Transculture/Transmedia," Exit Art, New York, New York

Select Catalogs and Bibliography

1992 *Sonia Balassanian: The Other Side*. Sculpture Center,  
New York, New York. Text by Geoffrey Young.  
Hess, Elizabeth. "Dress to Kill." *The Village Voice*,  
March 24.  
1989 *Sonia Balassanian: The Art of Brooding*. Exit Art,  
New York, New York. Text by Donald Kuspit.  
1988 *Committed to Print*. The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York, New York. Text by Deborah Wye.